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SUBJECT: Environmental Problems and Progress May Color
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11. (U) Summary. A recent study found that Belgium's ecological footprint is among Europe's worst, as it consumes far more resources than it produces. Nonetheless, progress has been made in cleaning up Belgium's environment in the past ten years, according to a new OECD assessment, with air and water quality improved. Polls indicate greater public awareness of and willingness to address the country's environmental problems. PM Verhofstadt's speech opening the IPCC meeting in Brussels April 2-6 offered Belgians a glimpse of his likely solutions, but what measures are ultimately sent to parliament will have to wait the outcome of Belgian Federal elections on June 10. Green issues have significantly colored the campaign, which has yet to officially start. End Summary.

12. (U) A California-based non-profit organization, Global Footprint Network, issued a study in March showing that Belgium consumes three times the quantity of environmental and biological resources that it generates. The figure is based on a method that calculates the biocapacity (resource supply) of a country compared to its resource demands (ecological footprint). Belgium and Luxembourg, according to this calculation, have the worst production/consumption deficit ratio of the EU 25, with a -10.9 hectare per person deficit. Currently the world as a whole is using resources at a deficit rate of -1.1 hectare per person. Data for the study goes back about 40 years and shows that Belgium's capacity to cover its own needs from its biosphere has gone down 24 percent, while its resource demands have gone up from 3.6 to 5.4 hectares per person. Factors contributing to this drop in environmental sustainability include a decreasing stock of natural resources, an increasing social dependence on transportation, and growing consumption of goods, heat, and electricity. Global Footprint says the evidence indicates the gap will widen.

13. (U) On the positive side, an OECD report released in March cited Belgian progress on the environment since the last OECD study in 1998. Belgian air quality improved, with 84 percent fewer harmful dioxins, 88 percent less mercury, and 80 percent less sulfur dioxide than ten years ago. Road transportation remains a problem, however, with particulate matter, CO2 and ozone emissions still high. The OECD study urges Belgium to cut energy consumption and lower transportation emissions, perhaps by discouraging road use with green taxes on vehicles.

14. (U) Water quality has also improved, according to the OECD, with half of Belgian waste water now being treated before release. Brussels media echoed this on March 22, with the announcement of a new water purification plant entering operation. For perhaps the first time since the industrial revolution, Brussels is treating 100 percent of the city's effluent before it is pumped into the Senne river. The 280 million Euro treatment plant is only the second one for the city, and finally fulfills a 1991 EU Directive to member states to clean up urban water systems. The new plant can treat the effluent of 1.1 million persons; in 2006 the average Belgian used 70,300 liters per person. (The US average is over 110,000 liters per person per year.) Despite this major progress in its capital, overall Belgium still leaves half of its waste water untreated.

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15. (U) A Francophone daily Le Soir regionally uneven, public aware's ecological situation respondents in francophone) and Brussels (82 percent concerned about at least a problem, but a major concern) said they were not bothered by any ecological issues, pollution, and waste the role of household
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heating usage, estimating it creates 10 percent of emissions, while it is actually 25 percent.

17. Capitalizing on Belgians' new-found sympathy for the environment, political leaders in the country are lining up to promote energy and environment-saving programs. The coming June 10 federal elections also spur this effort, as Belgium's major parties vie for the votes usually drawn to the green parties (already small, rendered even weaker by dividing into French- and Dutch-speaking groups). Isabelle Durant, secretary general of the francophone Ecolo party, called for action to keep Flanders from losing 63,000 hectares over the next century. Drawing on data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which met in Brussels April 2-6, she said a seven-inch rise in the North Sea has already been confirmed, and expectations are for up to 59 centimeters (two feet) rise by 2100. (Ref B details the impact climate change could have on Belgium.) Half of Belgium's 65-kilometer long sea coast is already protected by dikes and earthworks.

18. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (Flemish Liberal Open VLD), speaking at the opening of the IPCC, said the Royal Meteorological Institute calculates that Belgium's average climatic temperature has already risen one degree in the past 20 years. Verhofstadt wasted no time in capitalizing on the emerging social consensus, claiming that unpopular measures are inevitable, and it is the responsibility of today's politicians to take such measures. "We should be daring enough to use fully the most powerful instruments we have: taxes," he said. While noting that the budget already implements several environmental taxes (ref B), the Prime Minister cited several new options for Belgium: a tax on private cars based on CO2 emissions (already in place for company cars), a tax on business energy use, and a tax on housing based on energy consumption. Verhofstadt also proposed a "Minister of Climate" be added to the federal cabinet. This idea received mixed reviews, some lauding it if tied to existing energy or environment portfolios, others claiming it demeaned the work of the existing junior minister for sustainable development -- currently a Flemish Socialist (Spirit) party member. Green parties say they favor a Climate Minister and would be happy to join a coalition government if they could obtain that post.

19. (SBU) Comment: The Prime Minister has not actually proposed these measures to parliament, which is in "lame duck" session and rushing to complete a lengthy agenda prior to its dissolution in early May to face elections. Polls reveal increasing attention to environmental issues, and Verhofstadt's proposals reflect a greater public and political willingness to come to grips with environmental problems. Belgium's ongoing debate whether to reconsider Parliament's 2003 decision to start decommissioning Belgian nuclear power plants in 2015 had already injected environment and climate change issues into the campaign. The long history of Brussels problems, largely perceived leader is proposing exemplifies this balancing act. End Comment.

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